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CUSTOMS, GAMES, FESTIVALS, ETC.

Hamilton in his "New Account of the East Indies" published in 1744, writes:—

"It was an ancient custom for the Samorin (Zamorin, then the local potentate) to reign but twelve years and no longer. If he died before his term was expired it saved him a troublesome ceremony of cutting his own throat on a public scaffold erected for that purpose. He first made a feast for all his nobility and gentry, who were very numerous. After the feast, he saluted his guests, went on the scaffold, and very neatly cut his own throat in the view of the assembly. His body was, a little while after, burned with great pomp and ceremony, and the grandees elected a new Samorin. Whether that custom was a religious or a civil ceremony I know not, but it is now laid aside, and a new custom is followed by the modern Samorin, that a jubilee is proclaimed throughout his dominion, at the end of twelve years, and a tent is pitched for him in a spacious plain, and a great feast is celebrated for ten or twelve days with mirth and jollity, guns firing night and day, so at the end of the feast any four of the guests that have a mind to gain a crown by a desperate action in fighting their way through 30, or 40,000 of his guards, and kill the Samorin in his tent, he that kills him succeeds to him in his empire. In Anno 1695 one of these jubilees happened and the tent pitched near Ponnany (Ponani) a seaport of his about 16 leagues to the southward of Calicut. There were but three men that would venture on that desperate action, who fell on, with sword and target, among the guards, and after they had killed and wounded many were themselves killed. One of the *Desperadoes* had a nephew of fifteen or sixteen years of age, that kept close by his uncle in the attack on the guards, and when he saw him fall, the youth got through the guards into the tent and made a stroke at his majesty's head and had certainly dispatched him, if a large brass lamp which was burning over his head, had not marred the blow; but before he could make another, he was killed by the guards; and I believe the same Samorin reigns yet. I chanced to come that time along the coast and heard the guns for two or three days and nights successively."

Here must be made an excerpt from the "Malabar Manual" as its author Mr. Logan, while Collector (chief administrative officer) of Malabar, made excellent use of his opportunities to delve into the ancient archives of the district.

"The *Kêrala Mâhâtmya* so far corroborates Hamilton's story, that it declares the king used to be deposed at this festival, but there is no mention of self-immolation. although it is quite possible the deposed kings may have

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635 occasionally adopted this mode of escape from the cha-
527 grin of not being re-elected by their adherents." He goes on to say what Mr. Jonathan Duncan wrote about this festival, of which his account appears in the first volume of the Transactions of the Bombay Literary Society.

635 The festival was held last in 1743.

527 "Those who acknowledged the Zamorin's suzerainty sent
175 flags in token of fealty; and the places where these flags used to be hoisted at festival times are still pointed out. The Valluvanād Raja, who is still represented in the management of the Tirunāvāyi temple by one of the four Brahman *Kārālars*, instead of sending a flag used to send men called *Chāvers* (men who have elected to die) whose office it was to endeavour to cut their way through the Zamorin's guards to his throne in a manner presently to be described. If they had succeeded in killing him—as on the occasion cited by Hamilton, whose statement except as to date, is moreover corroborated by tradition—it is uncertain what would have happened; but probably if a capable Raja had been ruling in Valluvanād at such a time, popular opinion would have endowed him with suzerainty, for the Nâyar militia were very fickle, and flocked to the standard of the man who was fittest to command and who treated them the most considerately.

[127] "With the kind assistance of the present Zamorin, Maharaja Bahadur, the records of his family have been examined and a complete account obtained of the events attending the festival held in 1683 A.D., the festival next preceding that alluded to by Hamilton.

[32] "The festival used to continue for twenty-eight days every twelfth year when the planet Jupiter was in retrograde motion in the sign of *Karkadagam* or Cancer or the Crab, and at the time of the eighth lunar asterism in the month of Makaram the festival used to culminate.

"On the occasion in question the Zamorin some months beforehand sent orders for the preparation of the necessary timber and bamboos for the temporary buildings required at *Tirunāvāyi* and the materials were floated down stream from the Aliparamba Chirakkal lands.

"Then exactly two months before the opening day he sent out a circular to his followers worded as follows:—

'Royal writing to the *Akampati Janam* (body-guards).

'On the 5th Makaram 858 is *Mahāmakha Talpuyam* (time of the eighth lunar asterism in the festival season), and the *Lōkars* (chief people of each locality) are required to attend at Tirunāvāyi as in olden times.

'Mangātt Raman and Tinayancheri are sent to collect and bring you in regular order for the Mahāmakham.'

"The Zamorin timed himself to arrive at Tirunāvāyi on the day after that appointed for the arrival of his followers, and the

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lucky moment for the setting out on this particular occasion on the last day's stage of the journey was at the rising of the constellation of Aquarius.

"The *Tirunāvāyi* temple stands on the north bank of the Ponnāni river close to the present line of railway. Passengers by train can catch a glimpse of it by looking across the level expanse of paddy-fields which lie south of the sixth telegraph post on the three hundred and eighty-second mile of the railway. There is a modest clump of trees on the river bank hiding the temple, the western gateway of which faces a perfectly straight piece of road a little over half a mile in length stretching from the temple gateway westwards to the elevated ridge hemming in the paddy-fields on the west. This road is but little raised above the level of the paddy flat. Directly facing this straight piece of road as the elevated ridge is reached there are three or perhaps four terraces, the outlines of which may still be traced in the face of the precipitous bank.

"A little to one side of the upper terrace are the ruins of a strongly built powder magazine, and on the flat ground above and on both sides of the fine avenue shading the public road at this place is ample space for the erection of temporary houses.

"In a neighbouring enclosure under cultivation is a disused well of fine proportions and of most solid construction.

"From the upper terrace alluded to a commanding view is obtained facing eastwards of the level rice-plain at foot, of the broad placid river on the right backed by low hills, of higher flat-topped laterite plateaus on the left, their lower slopes bosomed in trees, and, in the far distance, of the great chain of Western Ghâts with the Nilgiris in the extreme left front hardly distinguishable in their proverbial colour from the sky above them. It was on this spot, on a smooth plateau of hard laterite rock, raised some 30 to 40 feet above the plain, that the Zamorin used several times in the course of the festival to take his stand with the sword of Chēramān Perumāl, the last emperor, in his hand.

"The sword is and has been for centuries, slowly rusting away in its scabbard, but it is not alone on it that the Zamorin depends for his safety, for the plain below him is covered with the 30,000 Nâyars of Ernâd, the 10,000 of Polanâd and numberless petty dependent chieftains, each counting his fighting men by the hundred or the thousand or by thousands. Away on the right across the river are the camps of the second prince of the Zamorin's family and of the dependent Punnattūr Raja; the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth princes' camps too are close at hand in the left front behind the temple, and behind the terrace itself is the Zamorin's camp.

"The whole scene is being made gay with flags as an elephant is being formally caparisoned with a chain of solid gold

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with 'one hundred and fourteen small links and one clasp, making in all one hundred and fifteen'—as the record specifically testifies—and with golden bosses and other ornaments too numerous to be detailed. But this part of the ceremonies is not to be permitted to pass unchallenged, for it signifies in a formal manner the Zamorin's intention to assume the *rôle* of *Rakshapurashan* or protector of the festivities and of the people there assembled. On the instant, therefore, there is a stir among the crowd assembled near the western gate of the temple directly facing at half a mile distance the Zamorin's standing-place on the upper terrace.

"From this post, running due east in a perfectly straight line to the western gate of the temple, is the straight piece of road already described, but the road itself is clear and the armed crowd on the plain, it is seen, are hemmed in by barrel palisadings running the full length of the road on both sides. Two spears' length apart the palisades are placed, and the armed crowd on either hand, consisting on this occasion of the thirty thousand Ērnād Nāyars, it is seen, are all carrying spears. The spearmen may not enter that narrow lane, and by the mere weight of their bodies present an impossible obstacle to the free passage of the foemen now bent on cutting down the Zamorin in his pride of place.

"Amid much din and firing of guns the *morituri*, the *Chaver* Nāyars, the elect of four Nāyar houses in Valluvanād, step forth from the crowd and receive the last blessings and farewells of their friends and relatives. They have just taken of the last meal they are to eat on earth at the house of the temple representative of their chieftain; they are decked with garlands and smeared with ashes. On this particular occasion it is one of the houses of Putumanna Panikkar who heads the fray. He is joined by seventeen of his friends—Nāyar or Māppilla or other arms-bearing caste men—for all who so wish may fall in with sword and target in support of the men whe have elected to die.

"Armed with swords and targets alone they rush at the spearmen thronging the palisades; they 'winde and turn their Bodies, as if they had no Bones, casting them forward and backward, high and low, even to the Astonishment of the Beholders,' as worthy Master Johnson describes them in a passage already quoted (page 137). But notwithstanding the suppleness of their limbs, notwithstanding their delight and skill and dexterity in their weapons, the result is inevitable and is prosaically recorded in the chronicle thus: 'The number of *Chavers* who came and died early morning the next day after the elephant began to be adorned with gold trappings—being *Putumanna Kantur Menon* and followers—were 18.

"At various times during the ten last days of the festival the same thing is repeated. Whenever the Zamorin takes his

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stand on the terrace, assumes the sword and shakes it, men rush forth from the crowd at the west temple gate only to be impaled on the spears of the guardsmen who relieve each other from day to day. The turns for this duty are specifically mentioned in the chronicle thus: 'on the day the golden ornaments are begun to be used the body-guard consists of the thirty thousand; of Ellaya Vakkayil Vellōdi (and his men) the second day, of Netiyiruppu,* Mūttarāti Tirumulpād (and his men) the third day of Ittatūrnād,† Nambiyātiri Tirumulpād (and his men) the fourth day, of Ērnād Mūnāmkūr,‡ Nambiyātiri Tirumulpād (and his men) the fifth day, of Ērnād,§ Elankur Nambiyāttiri Tirumalpād (and his men) the sixth day, and of the ten thousand,‖ the Calicut Talachanna Nāyar and Ērnād Mēnon the seventh day.'

[701]

"The chronicle is silent as to the turns for this duty on the eighth, ninth and tenth days. On the eleventh day, before the assembly broke up and after the final assault of the *Chāvers* had been delivered, the *Ernad Elankur Nambiyātiri Tirumalpad* (the Zamorin next in succession) and the *Tirumanisseri Nambūtiri* were conveyed in palanquins to the eastern end of the narrow palisaded lane, and thence they advanced on foot, prostrating themselves four times towards the Zamorin, once at the eastern end of the lane, twice in the middle, and once at the foot of the terraces. And after due permission was obtained they took their places on the Zamorin's right hand.

"After this, so the chronicle runs, it was the duty of the men who have formed the body guard to march up with music and pomp to make obeisance. On this occasion, however, a large portion of the body-guard seems to have been displeased, for they left without fulfilling this duty, and this story corroborates in a marked way the facts already set forth (page 132) regarding the independence and important political influence possessed by the Nāyars as a body.

"The *Ernād Menon* and the *Calicut Talachanna Nāyar* with their followers were the only chiefs who made obeisance in due form to the Zamorin on this occasion, and possibly by the time of the next festival (1695 A.D.), of which Hamilton wrote, the dissatisfaction might have increased among his followers and the Zamorin's life even may have been endangered

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* The fifth Prince of the Zamorin's family.
† The fourth Prince of the Zamorin's family.
‡ The third Prince of the Zamorin's family.
§ The second Prince and heir apparent of the Zamorin's family.
‖ The ten thousand of Pōlanād, the district round about Calicut, formed the Zamorin's own immediate body-guard—Conf. the account contained in the *Kōralolpatti* of how these men were originally selected—Chapter III, section (*a*).

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175 635 527 as Hamilton alleges, probably through lack of men to guard him. Tradition asserts that the *Chāver* who managed on one occasion to get through the guards and up to the Zamorin's seat belonged to the family of the Chāndrattil Panikkar.

"The chronicle winds up with a list of the *Chāvers* slain on this occasion, viz. :—

When the Zamorin was taking his stand on the terrace apparently at the commencement of festivities	5
On the day the elephant was adorned as already stated	18
"The next day of *Chandrattil Panikkar* and followers, the number who came and died	11
'Of *Verkōt Panikkar* and followers the number that came and died the third day.	12
'The number who came to Vakkayūr and died in the four days	4
'The number of *Chāvers* who were arrested at the place where Kalattal Itti Karunākara Menon was, and brought tied to Vakkayūr and put to death	1
'The number of *Chāvers* arrested on the day of the sacrifice, when all the men together made the obeisance below Vakkayūr at the time when the Zamorin was taking his stand, and left tied to the bars, and who were afterwards brought to Vakkayūr and after the ceremony was over and the Zamorin had returned to the palace were put to the sword	4
Total ...	55

"The chronicle does not mention the fact, but a current tradition states that the corpses of the slain were customarily kicked by elephants as far as the brink of the fine well, of which mention has been made, and into which they were tumbled promiscuously. The well itself is nearly filled up with débris of sorts, and a search made at the spot would probably elicit conclusive evidence of the truth of this tradition.

627 "The martial spirit of the Nāyars was in former days kept alive by such desperate enterprises as the above, but in every-day-life the Nāyar used to be prepared and ready to take vengeance on any who affronted him, for he invariably carried weapons, and when a man was slain it was incumbent on his

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764 [564] soon as death has taken place in a house, and on his arrival undertakes the general management of the ceremonies.

After the corpse is tied and laid on the plantain leaves, a ceremony called *Para Nirathuka* takes place. (*Para* is a measure of paddy, and *Nirathuka* means to place in line.) A coconut-oil lamp is lit and placed at the head of the corpse and immediately in front of it are placed three *paras* of rice. The significance of this ceremony is unknown to me.

766 *Ceremonies of Cremation.*—If the deceased is the eldest of a family the body is now cremated. A pyre is made of mango wood, and the corpse is placed with its head towards the south (the god of death, according to the Hindu mythology, resides in the south), and then covered with fuel. The nephew or younger brother lights the fire. Then all the members of the family and all others who have been polluted by contact with them go and bathe in the tank. During the process of burning there is a process called *Kumba pradikshanam*—which is manifestly an Aryan custom (*Kumbham* and *Pradikshanam* are two Sanskrit words: the first means a pot, and the second means to walk round). The ceremony, as its name implies, consists of walking round the pyre with a pitcher, the bottom of which is pierced. One of the family fills this pitcher with water and carries it three times round the burning corpse, dashing it on the ground at the end.

765 Two or three members of the family continue to perform funeral rites for the next fourteen days. As I have not taken part in it I do not possess first-hand knowledge.

765 783 [564] For all the fourteen days, all the members of the family are under pollution. The pollution, in the case of death, is very strong. All the members of the family are untouchable, and any Nāyar who touches them must purify himself by a bath. On the fourteenth day is the purificatory ceremony. The *Mārān* comes in the morning and gives everyone some oil. After smearing the body with these everyone goes and bathes, and comes back clad in white. The *Mārān* then sprinkles holy water, and a Brahmin priest purifies the house. There is generally a big feast for two days.

765 526 The feast on the fifteenth day is accompanied by some sports. All the men of the neighbouring villages come for it, and there is great *tamasha*. How far this could be identified with funeral sports elsewhere it is hard to say.

785 787 765 [529] After these feastings one of the family undertakes a *Diksha* (which means a vow) for forty-one[1] days or a whole year. During this time, the man who undertakes the *Diksha* lives apart with a Brahmin. He is not allowed to talk to or see a woman. He must not cut his hair or his nails. He must bathe twice a day in the river, or in the tank, and lead a pure and pious life. If it is only for forty-one days, there is not much feasting at the end of it. If it goes on for a full year, there is a huge celebration,

[1] All ordinary vows are taken for forty-one days. If you want to placate a deity you pray to him for forty-one days. If you want to make a big sacrifice it extends to forty-one days, etc.

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with all kind of sports.[1] The family, which is supposed to have been in mourning during the whole period, goes back to its normal life.

M. Van Gennep considers the state of mourning as "Un état de marge pour les survivants, dans lequel ils entrent des rites de séparation, et d'où ils sortent par des rites de réintegration dans la société général (rites de levée du deuil)."[2] With regard to the first fourteen days in particular, a Nāyar family in mourning constitutes a special society. During this period, and to a certain extent to the period till the final rites (forty-one days, or one year) social life is suspended. The ceremony at the end of the year is then a *rite de réintegration*.

VI.—RELIGION AND MAGIC AMONG THE NĀYARS.

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The religious beliefs of the Nāyars show an extraordinary mixture of Hindu and Dravidian cults. All the temples are dedicated to Krishna, Siva, or Kartyayani. There are also a few *kavus*, or groves, for the worship of the lesser Hindu deities. But the important point with regard to this is that the Nāyars are, as a whole, a people almost without a religion,[3] and they use Hindu temples for practices which receive no sanction even in the generous vagueness of that creed. The religious conceptions of Hinduism have but the slightest influence on the Nāyar community as a whole. It is quite true that there are a good many devout Hindus among the Nāyars, but the very fact that the distinction of Saiva-ism, Sakti-ism, Vaishnava-ism, etc., have not reached them, is sufficient proof that, though they have been Hinduised in form and have belonged to the Hindu fold, their primitive beliefs have survived to a great extent.

Nothing shows so much the extreme persistence of primitive culture, even in the face of higher civilising agencies, than the wide and almost universal acceptance of spirit-worship, and the almost entire absence of religious life among the Nāyars after at least twenty centuries of contact with Hinduism. Their contact with religions has not been limited indeed to Hinduism. The Jews, flying after the destruction of their Temple, found refuge among the Nāyars, and have lived in their midst for nigh two thousand years. The Apostle St. Thomas is supposed to have planted a community of Syrian Christians among them, who also have lived side by side with the Nāyars as their social inferiors in Malabar for almost the same length of time. Ever since Mohamed founded his religion in Arabia, Allah has found faithful worshippers in Malabar who moved with equal status among the Nāyar population. The beautiful creed of Gautama Buddha had for long its devout votaries in the land of the Nāyars, and traces of Buddhist monasteries and survivals of Buddhist worship still

[1] There is a story about a poet who enjoyed this celebration very much and said to the master of the house, "I hope there will be one like this here every year."

[2] *Rites de Passage*, p. 211.

[3] See the discussion following.

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to murder him, which is looked upon as a very innocent action, and for which no complaint is ever made. It is true that the pariahs have one day in the year when all the Nairs they can touch become their slaves, but the Nairs take such precautions to keep out of the way at the time, that an accident of that kind seldom happens." It is further recorded by Buchanan * that "the whole of these Nairs formed the militia of Malayala, directed by the Namburis and governed by the Rajahs. Their chief delight is in arms, but they are more inclined to use them for assassination or surprise, than in the open field. Their submission to their superiors was great, but they exacted deference from those under them with a cruelty and arrogance, rarely practised but among Hindus in their state of independence. A Nair was expected to instantly cut down a Tiar or Mucuai, who presumed to defile him by touching his person; and a similar fate awaited a slave, who did not turn out of the road as a Nair passed."

Nāyar is commonly said to be derived from the Sanskrit Nāyaka, a leader, and to be cognate with Naik, and Nayudu or Naidu. In this connection, Mr. L. Moore writes † that "if a reference is made to the Anglo-Indian Glossary (Hobson-Jobson) by Yule and Burnell, it will be found that the term Naik or Nayakan, and the word Nayar are derived from the same Sanskrit original, and there is a considerable amount of evidence to show that the Nayars of Malabar are closely connected by origin with the Nayakans of Vijayanagar.‡ Xavier, writing in 1542 to 1544, makes frequent references to men whom he calls Badages, who are said to have been

* Journey through Mysore, Canara, and Malabar, 1807.

† Malabar Law and Custom, 3rd ed., 1905.

‡ *Vide* R. Sewell. A Forgotten Empire (Vijayanagar), 1900.